



Eating, drinking and swallowing during COVID-19 (coronavirus)

Advice for staff supporting residents in care homes

People may have trouble with eating, drinking and swallowing if they develop COVID-19

- The difficulties may present as increased coughing, choking, chest infections or pneumonia.
- When we eat and drink we need to be able to coordinate our breathing with our swallow.
- At the point of swallowing we automatically hold our breath momentarily.
- If a person has COVID-19 symptoms or general weakness related to the virus, they may have more difficulty coordinating breathing and swallowing.
- This may increase the person's risk of aspiration and/ or choking.
- Aspiration may increase the person's risk of chest infections or pneumonia.

When people are unwell during COVID-19, they may have symptoms that make it harder for them to eat and drink:

- Coughing or shortness of breath
- Chest infections or nasal congestion
- Increased weakness and fatigue
- Increased confusion or delirium

They may also have a pre-existing difficulty with swallowing, eating and drinking and have been seen by a Speech and Language Therapist for assessment. They may have an SLT Swallowing care plan.

It is likely to take a while for people who have COVID-19 to build up to their previous daily oral intake.

They may prefer to take an easier texture of food than they usually take.

When helping someone to eat and drink, there are some tips that you can do to make it easier for him or her.

Getting ready for mealtimes



SLT swallowing advice

Check that any previous Speech and Language Therapy swallowing advice for this resident is being followed.

Glasses, dentures and hearing aids

If the resident has these, ensure they are worn and properly secured.



Oral care

COVID -19 can make someone's mouth very dry due to coughing and mouth breathing. Regular mouth care should be completed and the mouth checked to make sure it is clean after meal.



Utensils

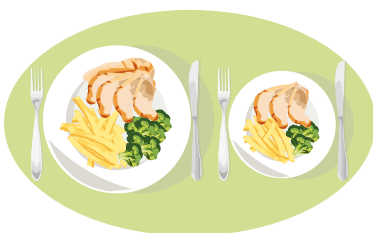


Check that items such as straws or spouted cups are really needed as they often lead to difficulty. Sips from an ordinary cup with assistance can often be safest.

If a Speech and Language Therapist has suggested a special cup or straw or using thickener, make sure you do this as it can help improve comfort and safety.

Distractions

The resident may get tired very quickly and be easily distracted.



Fatigue

Try to provide smaller amounts, often throughout the day, rather than three larger meals.



Alert

Make sure the resident is fully alert and awake for any food, fluid or medication.

Position

Always sit up fully for any eating or drinking. The person should remain upright for 30 minutes after intake.



Pace

Encourage the resident to eat or drink at a slower pace.

Ensure eating and drinking is at a steady rate and not too fast. Watch for a swallow and that the mouth is clear before the next spoonful or sip is taken.

Breathlessness and rest

Encourage them to stop and rest if they are feeling breathless to allow the breathing to return to normal before they take another sip/bite.

This will help reduce the risk of food/drink going into the lungs.



Oxygen masks

If they are receiving oxygen via a mask, remove the mask to place food in the mouth and then replace the mask while they are chewing the food. Similarly, with drinks, replace the mask between sips. This will help ensure they are not swallowing when short of breath and will reduce the risk of food or drink going into the lungs.

Amounts

Take small sips or bites. A teaspoon amount is about right.





Assistance

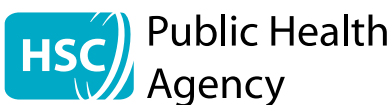
You may need someone to assist at mealtimes. When assisting, position yourself at eye level.

'Hand over hand' feeding, where the resident is supported to hold the cup or utensil, can make eating and drinking more comfortable and accessible, especially for people living with a dementia.

If you have followed safer swallowing advice and the resident continues to have difficulty, contact your local Speech and Language Therapy Department and refer for assessment.

Trust	Adult SLT contact number
Belfast HSCT Adult Community SLT	North & West (028) 9504 0330 South & East (028) 9504 0234
Northern HSCT Adult SLT Services	(028) 9034 1571
Western HSCT Adult SLT Services	Northern Sector (028) 7161 1428 Southern Sector (028) 6638 2547 Or via PARIS either directly if they have access to the system or by ringing (028) 7186 4399
Southern HSCT Adult SLT Services	(028) 3756 5744 or (028) 3756 0428
Southeastern HSCT Adult SLT Services	Ulster Hospital (028) 9055 0433 Rowan Centre Lisburn (028) 9263 5710 EXT 81424

Based on text by the Northern Ireland Regional Speech and Language Therapists Group, May 2020



Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

